

Harmony in Popular Belief and its Relation to Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

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I. INTRODUCTION.

Popular belief in this paper is understood as the traditional belief handed down among the people from generation to generation. It comprises the ceremonies and customs of the people in society formed to maintain or prolong the life of the group. Traditional belief means the conceptual system and the behavioural patterns underlying all customs and practices of the group, but it is mostly understood as underlying the religious customs connected with the worship of spirits.

Popular belief as the collective religious consciousness and behavioural standards of the people in society is a dynamic structure, which according to the overall movements of the socio-cultural context continually restructures itself and takes on new forms. It is in the mutual interaction of the people during a long period of time that the collective consciousness is formed, transmitted and manipulated and that concrete forms of interactions are transformed or strengthened. Although in Chinese society the different groups often show differences in the expressions of popular belief, still the internal collective consciousness and the forms of interaction uninterruptedly keep the traditional classical pattern. So, the content of popular belief should be seen not so much in the external expressions as in the underlying idea and value awareness. Popular belief should be seen as a set of metaphysics, realizing the aspired unity of man with the universe and by doing so establishes the purpose and meaning of human life. However the metaphysics of popular belief is different from the metaphysics of organized

religion in general in so far as the metaphysics in popular belief is not created consciously, but it is born during the vicissitudes of the life of the group in reaction to the changes in society and culture. This metaphysics structures itself in time starting with fragments which are brought into the system, assimilated or rejected, showing a collective creativity.

The most central idea of popular belief is its search for harmony between man and nature. Several authors have studied this already. This paper wants to give a simple and overall presentation to the idea of harmony in popular belief, searching for its primitive underlying structure and how it adapted itself in its collective thinking and feeling to an environment deeply influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

II. THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE OF THE IDEA OF HARMONY IN POPULAR BELIEF.

Although Chinese traditional society has a well-developed and very complete structure, still its umbilical cord with primitive society has never been cut: some psychological attitudes of its belief have been kept from primitive times till now as important expressions of spiritual reliance which through the accompanying practices of a mystical nature keep a hold on people. The metaphysics of popular belief still is deeply colored by primitive belief. The primitive world view is uninterruptedly transmitted and is the sacred background which forms people's emotional trust. This can be shown with regard to the idea of harmony in the following two points.

1. Harmony in popular belief finds its origin in the "anthropomorphic affection" of primitive animistic thinking. Man in his primitive stage already had collective intellectual activity and formed the principles of "primitive thinking", explaining man's interaction with nature through the principle of participation. Everything in nature is thought to be similar to what man experiences in this life: being moved by intentions, by desires, by affections. This results in the belief called anthropomorphic affectional animism, and believing that this world is filled with all kinds of spirits, it is followed by animistic worship. Popular belief has kept the primitive view that all these spiritual being exist in order to maintain a balance and a harmony between man and the natural universe. The main purpose of popular beliefs is to position man within the universe, let man and spirits mutually correspond and with the help of the powers of the spirits keep the weather favorable and the country prosperous and peaceful.

Although scorned by the intellectuals as "excessive cults", the worship of all those spiritual beings reflects the psychology of man's belief in the oneness of nature. Man's relation to the universe is not fragmented, but it

is a continuum of mutual intermingling and corresponding, showing all kinds of relations of affection and of mutual benefit. Even fear of and respect for the powers of the spirits are two sides of one relation. Together man and the universe form an entity of common destiny, for which it is necessary to keep a mutual balance and harmony. No matter how many forms of worship of spirits exist, the core of popular belief is to strive for union of man and nature. The spirits serve the purpose of bringing the two together: to help man fulfil his need to find a place in the universe and to dwell in harmony. All the spirits, wherever they originate, are harmoniously organized. In the eyes of the worshiper the spirit he or she worships is the most important one and is able to bring about communication with the universe so that the worshiper experiences a mutual harmony with the universe. In this way, he can overcome the deterioration of life and instead find improvement through the benefit of the interaction.

2. In popular belief harmony is continually renewed and communicated through the offering of sacrifices and the calling down of the spirits. The transmission of the primitive idea of harmony and union of man and nature almost mechanically takes place through the performance of rites by religious functionaries. The most primitive rite of communicating with the spirits is the calling down of the spirit in order to present or bestow favors or ward off *evi* so that the people can enjoy peace and happiness. Notwithstanding the progress of society, these rites were kept and perfected in China and they bring people constantly in touch with the religious psychology of the primitive belief transmitting its inner chart of the universe and the idea of harmony, systematically forming the ideas and understanding of the people. Further, through their religious affections and actions they naturally produce the values and concerns for daily life. Though the common people might not be able to tell the rationale for the rites, still the offering of incense, the kowtows and the burning of paper money express the harmony of mutual intimacy.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF CONFUCIAN THINKING ON HARMONY IN POPULAR BELIEF.

It is believed that Confucian thinking and popular belief have the same origin, namely Chinese primitive religious belief. But Confucianism greatly changed this belief from a primitive religious consciousness to a metaphysically grounded moral consciousness. The result was two phenomena, namely on the one hand the Confucian thinkers strongly reject popular belief as an impediment to the educative mission in society; on the other hand, popular belief uses the Confucian theory of the Way of Heaven to revive its primitive belief in spirits and so acquire superiority in social communicat-

ing. Confucian thinking is a system of philosophical belief, it is a rational metaphysical thinking which, based on a moral spirit, rationally communicates the mutually harmonious relations of man with the universe. Popular belief is a system of primitive religious belief whose nature is the primitive thinking of spirit worship and which through the mystical experience of the mediumistic communication seeks the connection of man and the universe.

Two Confucian influences on popular belief.

1. The harmony of man and nature, aided by the spirits is changed in the direction of a cultivation of individual self-realization. In the first relationship the spirits somehow control the situation: they are feared and worshipped and they distribute evil or fortune. Under the influence of Confucianism, popular belief, although it did not change its worship of spirits, still it started to pay more attention to the spiritual development of man himself. If man makes efforts to cultivate himself, he can complete man's way and be in harmony with Heaven's principle, attaining the desired harmony between heaven and man.

2. The harmony of man and nature with the help of spirits was expanded to harmony on the actual level of human relations. Confucianism's greatest breakthrough in popular belief was that the relation of man with the universe no longer only comprised man's relation to nature, but also extended to history, society and human life itself. It placed man within the human order of society so that through doing one's duty, one was joined into the natural harmony of the universe. In this way Confucianism changed the primitive idea of unity into an inner unity of human nature, doing away with the tensions between man and the outer world and through morality in daily life realizing the harmony in all different relationships. But popular belief continued to stress relations with the invisible, like relations with the ancestors, because they have bearing on the harmony in the family.

VI. THE INFLUENCE OF TAOIST PHILOSOPHY AND TAOIST RELIGION ON HARMONY IN POPULAR BELIEF.

Taoist philosophy expands the primitive belief into a metaphysical theory; Taoist religion continues the primitive belief in spirits and systematized it. As systems of belief, these two are very different.

Taoist philosophy provides popular belief with a very complete theoretical basis for the existence of the spiritual and also complements and undergirds its worshipping to a great extent. This is especially true of the idea of harmony.

Popular belief accepted many elements from Taoist religion, among them especially the theory and techniques of self-cultivation and how to nurture and preserve life. This has a big influence on the idea of harmony in popular belief. It can no longer be satisfied with the mystical experience of direct contact between man and spirits; it also hopes to extend this divine experience to the harmony of individual human relations and the prolongation of the life of the individual. Here Taoist religion has not only in theory brought together all kinds of systems of universal order and their symbols, like tao, chi, yin-yang, five phases, etc. explaining the relations between man and the universe and applied them to the human body with its essence, breath and spirit, but also in practice, it developed many methods like refining spirit, inhaling breath, concentrating thought, etc. It is through the cultivation of this inner alchemy that the individual can realize the spiritual union and insight of the religious realm.

V. THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM ON THE IDEA OF HARMONY IN POPULAR BELIEF.

Buddhism was a great challenge for popular belief which in turn adopted and made room for the worship of the Bodhisattvas in its structure of spirit worship, and also accepted the retributive law of cause and effect, the idea of transmigration, of the pure land of the Buddha, of the hungry ghosts and hells, etc. and the many practices connected with these ideas. This led to the development of the idea of the “unity of the three religions”. Buddhism easily compromised and adapted, but its attitude towards the worship of spirits in popular belief was ambiguous. According to the principle of expediency it joined the feasts and customs of popular belief. This led to a real fusion of beliefs for the people so that Buddhism became a stable and important spiritual element of support for popular belief. Based on this the individual could achieve personal value realization and pursue all kinds of harmony with the supernatural forces of the universe.

VI. CONCLUSION

Popular belief is a spontaneous and open spiritual system, continually interacting with the traditional spiritual energies in society in order to maintain its rational existence and development. It also suffered from destructive influences, like government interference and modern secularism, causing fractures in the system. Without outside support, popular belief is unable to adapt effectively to such situations. It is an open system without a strong doctrine and clearly organized religious practices. It misses a central spiritual leadership. Therefore, under pressure it easily loses its rational culture

acquired during its development, and falls back on its primitive reliance on spirit worship.

In the recent more open and democratic situation, popular belief finds new space for development: the resurgence of the other religions and of the traditional culture provides it with abundant resources and it produces many religious leaders and new religious movements. They try to solve the problems of popular belief but also create new problems. Some are very active and revolutionary, and so create new religions beyond the realm of popular belief. Others strengthen the primitive mediumistic and ecstatic practices in order to attract people with important revelations of the gods. All these phenomena offer new chances but also pose grave dangers for the rational development of popular belief which wants to satisfy the existential needs of the people.

(Summarized and translated by Jac Kuepers)